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Repositioning of 'self'

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Abstract

Resilience is increasingly seen as an asset for health, especially so for people living in marginalised spaces, where ill health is often associated with a lack of agency and a passive approach to tackling life's adversities. People who find themselves destitute following the asylum process in the UK are a group who occupy a vulnerable position and the purpose of this study was to interrogate the ways in which resilience is revealed within this context. In this paper, the dominant casting of asylum seekers as 'vulnerable' is challenged in order to explore new contours of resilience. This ethnographic study explored the lived experience of destitution and the findings demonstrate that contrary to the nascent literature that foregrounds vulnerability in destitution, resilience can be found within these narratives of struggle. Importantly, agency is demonstrated in the multiple ways that the participants actively sought to reject the label of 'asylum seeker' and were able to use identity work to achieve internal and social recognition. This 'struggle for recognition' developed resilient outcomes in the harshest of conditions.

Introduction

In recent years, asset based approaches to health have sought to shift the focus away from health needs towards nurturing strengths in individuals and communities (Bartley *et al*, 2010; Seaman *et al*, 2014). This is especially so for people living in marginalised spaces,

where ill health is often associated with a lack of agency and a passive approach to tackling life's adversities. In this context, promoting health requires a re-engagement with sources of resilience rather than focusing primarily on vulnerability. While it is widely recognised that people seeking asylum in high-income countries occupy a vulnerable structural position, this is often conflated with notions of individual weakness, susceptibility to illness and a lack of agency (Wilson *et al*, 2004; Aspinall, 2014). A plethora of scholarly literature testifies to experiences of torture, trauma and sexual violence experienced by refugees and people seeking asylum, contributing to ill health, mental distress, addictions and suicide (Crumlish and O'Rourke, 2010; Kalt *et al*, 2013). Nonetheless, many people who are seeking asylum remain healthy and it can be assumed that resilience is found even within the harshest of experiences. While the notion of resilience is a multifaceted concept and often presented as an *outcome* (Windle, 2011), in this paper it is understood as a *process* of adaptation involving complex interactions between an individual and his/her structural environment. It is defined as 'the capacity for populations to endure, adapt and generate new ways of thinking and functioning in the context of change, uncertainty or adversity' (Seaman *et al*, 2014). While scholarly research has been slow to draw attention to the ways that agency operates within the lives of marginalised groups, recent research (Clare *et al*, 2014) has documented the discourses of African women asylum seekers; in rejecting pity they position themselves as strong and resilient. In analysing the narratives of Bosnian refugees in Australia, Kokanovic and Stone (2010) also documented resistance to the dominant discourses of 'gratitude' circulating in the receiving societies. Nonetheless, this approach is rare. While it is widely recognised that the asylum seeker must be an excellent narrator of their own story in order to gain refugee status (Farrier, 2012), Rainbird (2012) also suggests that the 'official explanation' (Spivak, 1978, p. 114), namely that people seeking asylum are weak, vulnerable and to be pitied, operates in part for the benefit of refugee organisations, whose financial support is strengthened through such discourses. In addition, the UK media

construct the position of people seeking asylum within two competing and contradictory frameworks: on the one hand, as weak, dependent and particularly vulnerable to ill health (Packer, 2013) and on the other hand, as a danger to society, the enemy within, here to subvert, to deceive, agents of social disruption and deception (Innes, 2010). Indeed, this debate has become more polarised in recent months as evidence of British citizens taking up the call for Jihad and Iraq permeates Western media. While much of the critical analysis over the last decade has challenged these discourses of social disruption by foregrounding narratives of vulnerability, the concept of resilience in this context has been largely ignored.

In this paper, the dominant casting of asylum seekers as passive in the face of structural oppression is challenged. New contours of resilience are explored to foreground the ways that identity work develops resilient outcomes for those whose lives have been socially, culturally and geographically fragmented by the refugee experience (Rainbird, 2012).

Background

In recent years, an asset based approach to public health has gained traction (Morgan *et al*, 2010) and, while not a new approach, it has turned the attention of both policy makers and researchers away from a focus on health deficits towards identifying capabilities for health (Bartley *et al*, 2010; GCPH, 2011; Friedli, 2013). Rooted in the early work of Anthony Antonovsky and his notion of Salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1993), the asset based approach is one by which researchers seek to identify common capabilities that protect both individuals and communities against poor health outcomes (Lindstrom and Ericksson, 2010). While there is no consensus as to what these assets are and how they operate, several common capabilities that strengthen health have been identified; including, employment opportunities, strong interpersonal relationships (Seaman *et al*, 2014), social recognition (Honneth, 1995) and, more recently, resilience has been identified as a capability for health (Bartley *et al*, 2010). In a contemporary world characterised by change, flux and constant

fluidity (Bauman, 2005), it is suggested that resilience can support transformations for health in both individuals and communities (Seaman *et al*, 2014). Drawing on the burgeoning literature on health inequalities (Marmot *et al*, 2010; Mackenbach, 2012), resilience as an asset for health is understood to be particularly important for people who are living in poverty and in marginalised groups. Despite widespread recognition that those who live in situations of socio-economic deprivation are subject to ‘an unequal distribution of risk and challenge in society’ (GCPH, 2014, p. 15), research exploring the perspectives of people living within such groups is rare.

While it have long been recognised in other fields, the notion that resilience can be found in people who are socially positioned as ‘vulnerable’ is relatively new in health care research. In recent years, several scholars have sought to respond to such challenges by exploring the contours of vulnerability and resilience, explicating the ways in which the concept of vulnerability is socially framed and the mechanisms by which power operates to maintain these categories (Stewart, 2005). Canvin *et al* (2009) found hidden resilience in poor households in Britain and, far from being passive, people demonstrated agency in coping with hardship. Bottrell (2009) highlighted alternative forms of resilience in young people living in inner city. McDermott and Graham (2005) found young mothers to be ‘self-reflexive agents using the resources available to them to make their lives, and their children’s lives, happy and meaningful’ (p. 77). In a similar field, Mantovani and Thomas (2014) documented narratives of resistance in the lives of black teenage mothers who are ‘looked after’ by the State in London. In addition, Ungar (2004) has highlighted the complex ways that troubled youths in Canada used status, power and resistance to develop resilience in difficult social circumstances. Ungar (2012) also asserts that researchers using a narrow ‘Eurocentric and middle-class perspective’ (p. 378) have neglected to see the way that culture and context shape resilience. Interestingly, this growing body of research is beginning to uncover aspects of resilience that have been previously hidden and resilience is revealed to be a much more

nuanced notion than previously conceptualised, incorporating concepts of identity, recognition, culture and power.

Refugees and people seeking asylum are an interesting focus for this type of research, as they live in situations where they are stigmatised, denied legal recognition as citizens, often situated in social positions of marginality and have been forced to leave established social networks of family and friends in their search for safety. Several decades of research testify to evidence of resilience found in refugees living in refugee camps in low-income countries (Jacobsen, 2004; Dryden-Peterson, 2006; Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010) but this has not been explored in high-income contexts. Nair (2012) asserts that in a globalised world, characterised by postmodernity and global capitalism, 'the borderline of the global south is jagged, dispersed, and to be found not merely on the peripheries of the West but within its heartlands' (p.74). Thomas *et al* (2011) have recently challenged researchers to investigate the experiences of refugees living in urban settings, reflecting the demographic shift from refugee camps to urban environments. It is estimated that over 50% of the world's refugees now live in an urban setting (UNHCR, 2009) and, in the United Kingdom, the majority of people who arrive as refugees to claim asylum are placed in cities. Research has identified the multiple and complex ways that refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK draw on new social networks for support, access people and services who are sympathetic to their plight and negotiate new lives for themselves despite the harshest of conditions (Thomas *et al*, 2011). Nonetheless, the majority of this research is constructed within frameworks of 'vulnerability', rather than of resilience.

Destitution following the asylum process

People who find themselves destitute following the asylum process in Europe are situated in policy terms as one of the most vulnerable groups in society (see Stewart, 2005 for a fuller explanation of the ways in which the categories of resilience and vulnerability are

constructed, replicated and historically situated for people seeking asylum in the UK today). A plethora of literature now indicates that people who are living without any recourse to public funds and sleeping rough are vulnerable to ill health and also to exploitation (ICAR, 2004; Lewis, 2007, 2009; Crawley *et al*, 2011; Lewis *et al*, 2013). Accounts of mental health breakdown, physical illness and suicide are well documented in the literature. Nonetheless, several studies in the UK and Europe over the last decade have revealed that destitution following the asylum process is neither short term, nor is it limited to the few (Author, 2013). There are no accurate figures available of the numbers of people who are living destitute in the UK following a refusal from the asylum system but, in 2011, it was estimated to be around 285,000 (Crawley *et al*, 2011).

This paper draws on material from an ethnographic study documenting the lived experiences of people in the North East of England who find themselves destitute following the asylum process and uncovers the ways in which they find the strength to survive. In particular, it explores the ways that identity is embodied, enacted and performed in the lives of the participants and, in doing so, the ways that resilient outcomes can be achieved.

2. Methodology

This ethnographic study was conducted at a church community drop-in centre in a town in the North East of England over 6 months in 2013/14. The drop-in was open one afternoon a week and welcomed people who were destitute following the asylum process. Coming together in a church building to socialise, play games and enjoy a hot meal together, the participants discussed their life experiences. The principle means of understanding was to describe how the drop-in participants understood each other. Through observation and dialogue, researchers were privy to stories, experiences and observations of daily interaction. These stories were shared during meals, when playing games together, through food and informal conversation. Particular attention was paid to 'speech acts', temporality

and the discursive ways that identity was reconstructed through interactions at the group and through individual interviews (Atkinson, 2015). Cultural events were also attended outside of the drop-in and family events were shared. Oral consent was obtained from the participants in the group to be part of this study and field notes were recorded. The participants all lived itinerant lives, moving between several towns and cities in the North of England and elsewhere in the UK. Ethical approval for this research was obtained in line with University of Sunderland Ethical Committee protocols.

The participants at the drop-in were all men and from a wide range of countries, primarily sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle-East regions. The group organisers stated that it had never been their intention for the drop-in to be a men only group but the majority of destitute people are young men and so the women only stayed briefly, saying that they did not feel comfortable. A few of the women did attend the group but they primarily helped in the kitchen. The principle investigator (PI) was well known to the research participants as she had been involved in helping with this group in a voluntary capacity for many years, so trust was already well established. Nonetheless, the PI was female, a professional researcher and white. Aware that is not a fixed phenotype but is situated within cultural and socio-historical practices and confers structural advantage (Faria and Mollett, 2016), reflexivity was an important part of this ethnographic study (Smith, 2016) and this was closely attended to in order to further understand the complexity of the relationships and limitations in the field (Author, *forthcoming*). While it is recognised that authenticity is not necessarily uncovered by an 'insider' perspective (Ryan *et al*, 2011), peer researchers were also recruited to co-construct the research. This was both for practical and theoretical reasons; to gain access to a 'hidden' group in society and also to ensure co-construction of the research study across cultural boundaries. It would not have been culturally acceptable for the female PI to interview the men individually and the male peer researchers were able to elicit deep cultural information not accessible to the PI. O'Neill and Hubbard (2012) assert

that 'the voices of destitute asylum seekers are rarely heard' (p.4) as 'powerful social groups' often have the 'speaking rights' of refugees, rather than those experiencing the refugee process themselves (Yap *et al*, 2010). Peer ethnography is an innovative way to enable those voices to be heard.

The two peer researchers were identified as individuals who were highly respected within the group and spoke excellent English and Arabic. They were also identified as trusted members of the group, who were willing and able to engage with this 'border work' (Somerville and Perkins, 2003; Haggis, Schech and Rainbird, 2007) because they had strong social networks and had lived in the UK for several years. Nonetheless, the peer researchers did not have any previous experience in research and were not bi-cultural workers but members of the drop-in group and strongly identified with the lived experiences of the participants. They were given training in qualitative research methodologies, interview techniques and asking open questions. They were involved in the design, data collection and analysis of the data. They attended the drop-in and then recruited and interviewed the participants from their group of friends and contacts. All of the interviews were conducted in Arabic. Twenty-two men and two women were interviewed by the peer researchers to explore their views and experiences of living in destitution following the asylum process. All of the participants were either destitute at the time of the interviews or had experienced destitution in the preceding few months. Nineteen of the participants identified themselves as Sudanese, with the other participants from Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and Palestine. They had all been living destitute in the UK following the asylum process for between 2 months and 8 years.

Interviews were recorded using a semi-structured interview schedule as an initial guide. All names were changed to preserve the anonymity of the research participants and the interviews were recorded. The peer researchers translated the interviews from Arabic into

English and they were then transcribed in English for analysis. Data was analysed using constant comparison of the rich data collected and by situating this within a generic analysis of the wider socio-political context (Atkinson, 2015). Peer researchers were involved at each stage of the research process, developing the interview questions to final completion of the research report.

3. Findings

The findings of this study uncover the multiple and complex ways that people who find themselves destitute following the asylum process in the UK use identity work to achieve internal and social recognition. Situated between polarised discourses of citizenship and illegality; rough sleeper and scrounger; undeserving and deserving poor, the participants negotiated shifting identities. Using embodied, performed and discursive means, they negotiated the space between the 'socially situated self' and the 'internal self'. Resilience was achieved as the outcome of these complex social and discursive processes. This required a negotiation of the space between multiple changing identity positions, created by both the refugee experience and the experience of becoming destitute. The ability of the participants to successfully construct a legitimate subject position that resisted identities imposed on them by the media and to reconstruct socially recognisable identities in that 'space between' resulted in resilient outcomes.

The 'socially situated self'

The social construction of asylum seekers as dangerous is deeply embedded within contemporary social values and welfare policies in Europe; consequently, it had a palpable influence upon the everyday lives of the participants who attended the drop-in group. The participants were very aware that they are socially positioned by virtue of their status as outside of the dominant cultural norms of citizenship; they are 'unsuitable' citizens. They regularly read the tabloid newspapers and discussed with

each other their positionality as 'scroungers', 'illegals' or 'terrorists'. Socially situated as the 'other' they frequently recounted experiences of being spat at in the street or having strangers shouting at them in the street, 'go back to your f***ing country'. To add to this, they now found themselves living in a destitute state. Destitution following the asylum system has recently been identified as a growing issue in the UK (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). As identity is continually re-negotiated depending on context and interaction with others (Haggis, Schech and Rainbird, 2007), the participants had again had to re-adjust to the physical and social repositioning of being homeless. In response, the participants demonstrated practices that negotiated the space between the identity inscribed on them as the dangerous 'other' and the legitimate 'same' by using a range of physical and socio-cultural tools.

Repositioning the social self: moving from 'other' to 'same'

The participants actively created invisibility by re-positioning themselves as students, rather than being identified as asylum seekers. Identity is embodied and, in a predominantly white northern town, skin colour was a marker as either an asylum seeker or as an international student. When visitors came to the group, they spoke of going to college, which for some was true, as many had participated in English language courses at a local further education college during their time in the UK. They described college life and took on the socially acceptable identity of students. The majority of men at the drop-in dressed in clean student style clothes and they were very careful to give no indication of their destitute state. There were some exceptions, particularly people who were regularly sleeping rough or had drug and/or alcohol addictions, but the majority of participants gave no external indication of their destitute state. Creating invisibility by taking on the identity of a 'student' was a

powerful way to dissolve the 'asylum seeker' label and create a socially recognisable identity.

Moving from the 'other' to the 'same' was also achieved by attendance at the drop-in and other physical places where social positions were flattened and were free of stigmatisation and judgement. The participants highlighted the importance of de-stigmatised places in maintaining resilience. The value of social support is well documented in the existing literature around resilience but what was particularly interesting in this study is that social groups were re-shaped following the experience of destitution. It is well known that people find support within their own ethnic or religious groups, but what was new in this research is that many of the participants found support across ethnic, cultural and religious groups in a way they hadn't expected. Destitution following the asylum process was identified as a 'levelling of the social barriers' in a way that many of the participants hadn't experienced before. Attending groups where destitute people were encouraged to go to, whether food distribution centres, free meals in churches or charity organisations or social groups, was expressed by several of the participants as a positive experience. These places were a place of equality, where everyone was in the same situation and freedom from the weight of stigma was found in such places. Osman explained it below:

When you go to these organisations, you will meet other people and you hear problems and sometimes you hear a problem from someone else, you feel that you don't have a problem because it is not as big as the other guy's problem.

And really, when you go there, you feel comfortable because it is the same like when you are in detention because all of the people inside have the same problem, so when you are there, no-one is better than anyone else. We are all the same and that is why we go to these charities. They keep us strong [sic]

Again, the participants in this study took active measures to position themselves in situations where they were the 'same' and, as such, were not judged as deviant or diminished. A field note explains this further:

Field note 46: It is interesting how the guys relax when they come in the group. They say that they feel 'safe' as 'no-one is judging you man'. The guys who are destitute seem to hold a certain respect for each other – respect that they are surviving such hardship. There is dignity and respect between the guys, in the ways that they act towards each other.

By placing themselves in situations where they felt socially equal to others in the group, in a small way they were able to make their stigma invisible and to feel like a valued member of that group.

Repositioning the social self: moving from 'illegal' to 'having a case'

While the participants negotiated a shift from the 'other' to the 'same' using physical and socio-cultural means, they re-positioned themselves from the toxic label of 'illegals' through discursive practices.

The majority of participants explained that their determination to keep going, to keep on living in the UK even in such desperate conditions, was that they 'had a case'. By this, they meant that they believed that they had a genuine case for asylum in the UK and they were determined to stay and prove it to the Home Office. The metaphors used were of a fight: a 'fight for justice' or a 'fight to defend human rights'. In the interviews, they asserted their 'cause' as one of social/legal justice and actively distanced themselves from religious causes. Khalid, a young man from Sudan, explained it as:

It was difficult and it was the first difficult experience I have been through since I left Sudan because I came here and I know I have a genuine problem in Sudan and I was hoping that the government in the UK would let me stay and feel safe. I need to support my family in Sudan and I need to keep fighting for my case. I am determined to reach the end of the road and prove to the Home Office that I have a case [ibid].

Mostafa and Walid, both young men from Sudan, reiterated this view in their narratives, as the vignettes below show:

The reason I am here is that I am fighting for my case. I left Sudan and I went through danger much more than the situation I am in now. More of these difficulties, sometimes put you under a great danger and you may get killed or dies and every time I think about hunger and disrespect or many things, I just compare them to the danger I have been through in my country until I got here and I put them on the scales and I found that the balance was in favour of now. And so I stay strong. [sic][Mostafa]

I can't go back and so this is the only solution for me, I have to fight for justice to be done. This is my life now. This is who I am now. [sic] [Walid]

Comparisons with the dangers and difficulties these men and women had experienced in their country of origin frequently entered the narratives of the participants and many said that they knew that even the harshest of conditions in the UK was not as bad as the situations they'd fled in their home country. This gave them the strength to keep going and again they reasserted themselves not only as 'strong survivors' but also as having a cause. Jamal explains below:

Every time I think of Libya, I feel that I have to continue here, to fight for my case. It is bad here but it is better than in Libya. I am strong and I will fight for justice. [sic] [Jamal].

Acknowledging the extreme hardship of destitution, far from being passive to the situation they found themselves in, many of the participants became involved in a personal battle for justice for their 'case'. In negotiating the space between identities ascribed by the media as 'illegals' and their 'individual identity' as someone 'having a case', the participants were able to use discursive practices to give meaning to life and presented a path for resilience and social meaning.

Repositioning the social self: moving from 'scrounger' to 'worker'

The young men in this study were aware that they were positioned, by their lack of citizenship and by social stigma, outside of the dominant socio-political norms of worker; they were deviant citizens. Often positioned as 'scroungers', they were desperate to work to support themselves and Mohammed expresses his shame at having to ask for help:

The difficult thing was to go to my friend's house to eat – I want to provide for myself and to send money back to my family in my country. You must keep your hands up and not down [it is shameful to ask for support]. I need to work but my case was refused. [sic] [Mohammed]

The men often asked at the drop-in if they could volunteer to help; eager to contribute to the set-up and preparation of the meals. Participants found it difficult to find any voluntary work and even then they were unable to participate due to Home Office restrictions. Mahajoub described the difficulties:

I tried to work voluntary before but even the Home Office do not allow that. I did not come here to get things free, that is not right, that is not what we do in my country. I came here because I have a case and I want to work. [sic]

To reposition themselves as workers and providers, many of the male participants spoke about their 'past self' bringing narratives of previous work, social location in their country of origin, previous wealth and privilege as central to current identity. In their 'speech acts', they worked hard to re-construct their identity as the 'hard working citizen', caught within disadvantageous situations. Several of the participants described how their families (predominantly wives and children) had remained in their country of origin and were still dependent on them to send money back home. Haskim was driven by the need both to prove his 'case' and also to support his family in Sudan:

The reason that makes me strong, first of all, I left Sudan because I have a problem and I was in danger. The war pushed people to leave their land and the only think that was keeping me strong was my mother and my children. I want to be strong to support my mother and my own children in Sudan. It was like an encouragement for me to continue, and to prove that I have a case and I can be successful. [sic]

Many of the younger men confessed that they had lied to their parents and families about the harshness of their situation in the UK, preferring to paint a picture of employment opportunity and happiness. Some even managed to send home some money they had earned illegally working in local businesses to continue to support their families at home. Nonetheless, as time progressed their ability to do this diminished, along with a sense of self.

Repositioning the internal self: moving from 'weak' to 'strong survivor'

For all of the participants who were interviewed, the starting point was the day they received the letter from the Home Office informing them that their asylum application (or appeal) had been refused and they had 10 days to leave their accommodation. Participants found this period to be extremely traumatic, describing the day they received the letter as devastating. Their overall feeling was that life had fallen apart and they were living through a catastrophe. The subsequent few days were described as days of 'panic', of not feeling 'stable' and most struggled with 'feeling down' and 'crushed'.

Mahajoub, a Sudanese man described the anguish very graphically:

When the letter came, it was beyond imagination. I tried to kill myself because when they kick you out of the house and without support, this is something unacceptable at all. I was devastated, panicked and I nearly became crazy. I was a man without an identity. You couldn't eat, you couldn't drink, you couldn't find a place to lay your head. It is a very big problem. I did not just enter depression, I actually went down more than this. I became to hate myself. I couldn't even talk to myself. [sic]

It should be noted that many of the participants talked about people they knew who had been through similar situations and had not managed to 'keep strong' but had suffered mental illness or suicide as a result of these hardships. Nonetheless, while all of the participants described the shock and devastation of receiving the letter in similar terms, there soon followed narratives of resilience and, while not described by any of the participants as a 'bounce back', it was much more a fight for survival. The days and weeks following the eviction from their accommodation were characterised by a search for food, for somewhere to sleep at night and for safety. During this time, participants drew heavily on the hospitality of friends and of local charities for food,

accommodation and support. While acknowledging the necessity of these friendships and organisations, the 'speech acts' of the participants took on a temporal quality. Moving from the 'past self' to the 'present self' was recounted as a metaphorical journey where hardship developed strength and resilience. Matan explained how various charitable organisations had given him food and small cash payments and how this had helped him to develop strength and to become a 'survivor':

I could manage to help myself with this support [food and cash] and it helped me to become strong and to become a survivor....two years without support is a long time and no-one can help you unless you help yourself. You have to be strong. [sic]

When asked what kept him strong in the face of the harsh difficulties of destitution, Ali explained:

I am not a weak man. I have faced many difficulties in Sudan and that was much worse than here. If I cannot live with these difficulties, then I am a weak man. I need to become strong and to be a strong man to survive these difficulties here. [sic]

In re-framing their lives as that of a 'strong survivor', the narratives of the participants moved from desperation and despair to those of coping. This drew a boundary around negative discursive representations of asylum seekers as weak and vulnerable and filled the space between the 'socially situated self' and the 'internal self' with narratives of strength. This positive sense of self gave social legitimacy to their lives, within a context of extreme structural discrimination and hardship. The popular adage 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' was used in different ways by many of the participants, to explain the ways that each setback, or each difficulty that they encountered initially, set them back but then they coped and felt that they were

stronger as a result. Ali, who had been living destitute for over a year, described it using two different metaphors:

If they beat me, the first one is sore but then you get used to it and you get stronger each beating. If someone throws water on you, you might as well go for a swim, you are wet anyway. It doesn't matter how hard it gets, each time you get stronger. This is what it is like for us. [sic]

Contrary to some similar work on the reconstruction of identities by McDermott and Graham (2005), the participants did not 'other' asylum seekers they knew who they perceived to transgress the boundaries of 'strong survivor', but related accounts of people they knew who had become mentally ill or misused substances as 'unlucky'. Where the participants did use 'othering', it was in relation to their earlier selves; asserting themselves now as the 'strong survivor', setting aside their earlier 'weak and fearful' selves.

Repositioning the social self: from 'good believer' to 'religious purity'

In addition to asserting a legal case for asylum, the participants recognised life as a trial, often but not exclusively from God. This was a key idea put forward by many of the participants as something associated with resilience. This was often closely related to the notion that life on earth was a 'test from God' and that resilience was then seen as something that was developed as a result of such a test.

As a Muslim, I accept everything God has planned for me. I can't change my situation because God wants me to go through this and He examines you to see how strong you are. [sic] [Osman]

As a Muslim, we have beliefs and faith and we have to challenge every difficulty because we believe that this is a test from God. [sic] [Omer]

For several of the participants, both Christian and Islamic beliefs not only sustained their approach to destitution and hardship, but it also made them dig deep into their faith and they found new spiritual resources to support them. The analogy was used several times of getting rid of impurities in life by being refined through the fire, and through this analogy, the participants indicated that they believed that the difficulties they were going through were building their strength and purity as individuals. Associated with this was the strong belief expressed by many of the participants that 'rewards' would be deferred to later in human life or in an afterlife. Mohammed summed it up as:

I know that I am being put through a test from God and even if it is very difficult now, it makes me a stronger person and a better Muslim, so it is possible to live with these difficulties. [sic]

These internal beliefs were supported by the wider faith community, which many of the respondents also drew on for help and support. Many faith-based organisations in the area supplied food, but many of the participants also attended regular services in both the local mosques and churches to pray and worship. In this way, the narratives of the participants showed ways of making sense of their situations and of actively re-negotiating their identity to become one of religious purification and reward. Internal repositioning took on a temporal element, as narratives of difficult lives lived in destitution were re-negotiated through discursive and social acts as progress towards 'religious purity'.

Discussion

Identity positions are understood as fluid social processes, embodied and performed within shifting socio-political contexts. 'In the refugee experience, the future, present, and even the past become the 'unknown terrain' that must be relearned' (Coker, 2004, p.17). This sense

of 'unknown terrain' is further heightened when the refugee becomes destitute; homeless, hungry and dislocated they must learn to survive. Situated at the junction between geopolitics, conflict, displacement and daily needs, the person who finds themselves destitute following the asylum process experiences 'identity dissonance' (Nentwich et al., 2013; Warin, 2006). Caught in an 'unknown terrain', 'identity dissonance' is conceptualised here as a space between the 'socially situated self' and the 'internal self'. By using embodied, performative and discursive practices to reposition the social and internal self, they were able to demonstrate agency and to construct themselves as a legitimate subject. This study exposes the complexity of the relationship between vulnerability and resilience; far from being binary opposites, resilience was found not only in the midst of situations of structural vulnerability, but as a process that involves the re-shaping of identity and re-positioning of 'self'. In doing so, the participants were able to reposition themselves in ways that gave meaning to their lives and created resilient outcomes.

In re-positioning the social self, the study participants situated themselves as students, re-scripting their lives to play the part of students. In taking a dramatological account of human interaction, Goffman (1961, 1963) contends that each person displays a series of masks for the other and he contends that these change according to social context. In this study, the discredited 'performed self' (Goffman, 1961, 1963) is re-scripted to a normalised and accepted self. The participants were able to re-configure the toxic and stigmatising label of 'asylum seeker' by becoming 'students'. They hid the visual markers of stigma by dressing like students and were able to manage this discreditable stigma (Goffman, 1963). When the support of family, employment, financial stability and citizenship is stripped away, hidden forms of resilience are exposed (Canvin *et al*, 2009). By 'creating invisibility', participants demonstrated agency and this supported resilient outcomes.

In addition, the participants at the weekly drop-in, and also those who participated in interviews with their peers, were able to 'perform' their self-image (Goffman, 1959) in a new way. Surrounded by other people who were also destitute following the asylum process, there was no longer a need in this context to 'perform' asylum as vulnerability, need or weakness. While recognising the real lived hardship of destitution, the performance of vulnerability is also a necessary part of the asylum process. In order to secure citizenship, the person seeking asylum must narrate a story of vulnerability, danger and insecurity – this can change in the new context of destitution. The participants in this study were able to perform different narratives in the context of the drop-in and peer interviews; narratives of vulnerability were exchanged for discourses of strength. Strength in the midst of structural oppression became the new narrative and the new performance of self.

Notwithstanding these insights, to reduce the deep identity work undertaken by the participants in this study to merely 'changing the label' through a Goffmanian 'performance', is to negate the 'struggle for recognition' that was undertaken by these participants.

Oppression is not merely about being ascribed a 'label', but it is part of a nexus of exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence/humiliation (Young, 1990). Scambler (2009) urges scholars looking at stigma, deviance and health to move beyond Goffman's 'performance' of stigma to contextualise stigma within the social structures and political economy of society. 'Stigma and deviance can be inscribed on persons' through 'structured social relations' (Scambler, 2009, p. 453). Having lost the 'right to have rights' (Arendt, 1973) and reduced to a 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998), without citizenship, home, the possibility of employment or financial security, the participants in this study were fighting the social and political structures that seek to inscribe on them the position of 'vulnerability'. By claiming socially and internally recognised identities, situated in the space between the 'socially positioned self' and the 'internal self', they were able to find meaning, purpose and strength.

When people become destitute following the asylum process, the disrupted biography of their lives (Bury, 1982; Charmaz, 1983) moves from one of seeking sanctuary and citizenship, to one of destitution and severe hardship. With the opening of the refusal letter, life ceases to be a journey towards citizenship and becomes a life lived 'between destitution and a hard place' (Author, 2013). The work of the destitute person then becomes one of survival; not only finding food and shelter to survive but also mental survival, finding the strength to survive this sudden disruption of the migration narrative. They must learn how to 'fit their individual narrative into an extended political discourse' (Pineteh, 2005, p.383). Identity work begins here; re-working self-identity to one that is both recognised internally by the self and also recognised externally by society (Honneth, 1995).

The drop-in became a micro-site where individual needs, community relations and geo-politics intersected. It was a space where the 'socially situated self' and the 'internal self' could be re-negotiated to produce resilient outcomes. While taking different theoretical positions, this 'struggle for recognition' resonates with the work of the political philosophers Alex Honneth (1995) and Nancy Fraser (1998). The synergy in their work is that both theorists position the concept of 'recognition' as central for a healthy functioning life (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Nonetheless, for Fraser (2009) recognition is central to social justice. She argues that social injustice renders 'human beings primarily as passive objects under the sway of structural forces' (p.41) and that the impact of this is that it negates 'the freedom of associated social actors to participate with one another in framing the norms that bind them' (p.41). For Fraser (2009), social injustice renders people as 'causal objects' and the work of social justice is to restore these 'causal objects' to 'social and political actors' (p.43) again. In seeking to represent themselves as valued social and political actors, the participants in this study sought out social situations that rendered them as active citizens, workers and strong, engaged in deep-rooted identity work as a path to resilience in the face of destitution.

The findings of this study are limited to a small group of mainly Sudanese men living in one geographical location in the UK and, while the results are not generalizable, they give insights into the complex relationship between identity work and resilience. The study would have benefited from a wider range of cultural groups represented in the interviews. There were only two women included in the study, as very few women in the area were destitute¹ and this makes the study limited in the insights it can draw in relation to gender roles and identity.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that vulnerability is only one part of the refugee story and uncovers discourses of strength that support resilience. It also explores the ways that narratives of agency are obscured by notions of vulnerability in refugee research in high-income countries. Drawing on the seminal work of Goffman (1967), it is clear that both refugees and refugee organisations play scripted roles, foregrounding vulnerability and a lack of agency in order to realise their goal of gaining citizenship. Rosello (2012) powerfully argues that ‘the asylum seeker’s narrative performance opens or shuts the border by establishing the refugee’s identity’(p. 5). Nonetheless, in deconstructing and critiquing the ways in which categories of resilience and vulnerability are constructed, replicated and historically situated, the findings of this study open up a space to interrogate sites where resilience is obscured by discourses of vulnerability. Resilience is an asset for health and develops in environments where people feel recognisable to themselves and to society; places where people feel the ‘same’ rather than the ‘other’. Public health and social services should support organisations in the community that develop this kind of atmosphere in order to promote resilient outcomes for health improvement.

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